The Power of the Message of the Cross

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The Power of the Message

Those testimonies, I was reminded of what Paul said in the book of Corinthians. You know, you can imagine that lots of people would have either witnessed maybe something like that, or had the opportunity to hear something about what we witnessed this morning, and really there'd be two reactions. I think it's fair to say two reactions to what we witnessed. And in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul said:

> [1 Corinthians 1:18 NKJV]
> For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

And so as I heard those testimonies—trust you, the same—as you heard those testimonies, we heard something of the power of God and what it's able to do in a life. And so it makes sense, in keeping with that thinking, that, you know, that there's power in the message of the cross, that we could actually turn to the cross scene of the Lord Jesus, and we could see that power at work. And so I'd like to do that.

I'd like to read in Luke chapter 23. Now, we could read this same scene in Matthew. We could read it in Mark. I've chosen this morning to read it in Luke's Gospel. And it's just before the Lord Jesus goes to the cross, and it's the story about Barabbas. And so in Luke chapter 23, verse 13, it says:

> [Luke 23:13-25 NKJV]
> 13 Then Pilate, when he had called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, 14 said to them, "You have brought this Man to me, as one who misleads the people. And indeed, having examined Him in your presence, I have found no fault

> in this Man concerning those things of which you accuse Him; [15] no, neither did Herod, for I sent you back to him; and indeed nothing deserving of death has been done by Him. [16] I will therefore chastise Him and release Him" 17 (for it was necessary for him to release one to them at the feast).
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> [18] And they all cried out at once, saying, "Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas"-- [19] who had been thrown into prison for a certain rebellion made in the city, and for murder.
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> [20] Pilate, therefore, wishing to release Jesus, again called out to them. [21] But they shouted, saying, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"
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> [22] Then he said to them the third time, "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go."
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> [23] But they were insistent, demanding with loud voices that He be crucified. And the voices of these men and of the chief priests prevailed. [24] So Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they requested. [25] And he released to them the one they requested, who for rebellion and murder had been thrown into prison; but he delivered Jesus to their will.

That may very well be one of the saddest portions you can read in the Bible. I mean, there's lots of passages that are gripping—no question about it. There's lots to be said for the message of the cross, which is the power of God. But as we read this story, this account—because it's not a story, this account, the cross scene of the Lord Jesus—and watch people choose a murderer to go free, and knowingly reject the Prince of Life, what a tragedy!

Pilate's Dilemma and the Choice of Barabbas

One of the things I appreciate about the Bible is that the Bible allows me to stand apart from any story, any account, and at some level pass judgment, make a decision, to mentally, if you will, take a decision: make the wrong decision or even the right decision, but not act upon it. The Lord Jesus taught in parables, and what parables allow people to do is to stand apart from the story and assess the events, the outcome, and make decisions, but yet never be engaged in the actual process.

And so I think it's fair, as we read this story, to say that we would never do this, would we? Would we sit here this morning and say that the Lord Jesus presented on one side—a Man who the Apostle Peter said in summary of His ministry that He went around helping people, He went around doing good—and so we have the Lord Jesus here, and we have a convicted

murderer, felon, and we would choose the convicted felon murderer to go free? And we would cry out for the innocent Lord Jesus to be delivered up to the most gruesome death that men could ever conceive of? And yet that's what we read happened.

And so you have all these stories going on. I mean, we just read it in Luke, but we read it in Matthew and in Mark, and we start to put this story together. We can paint some kind of a scene of what happened. We can know from Matthew and from Mark that Pilate wanted to do the right thing. He wanted to release Jesus, but he also wanted to please the people. That's what it says. And so this was his dilemma: wanting to do the right thing, wanting to please the people. Well, you know, in 2026, those two concepts are still at odds: doing the right thing and pleasing others. Sadly, they conflict still.

Then we have—if that's not enough that Pilate wanted to do the right thing—he knew Jesus was innocent. He had others, men he would have considered peers, who confessed the same thing, who examined the Lord Jesus and were convinced that He was innocent. So he wanted to do the right thing. He knew the Lord Jesus was innocent. He had peers that would testify the same: Jesus was innocent, had done nothing deserving of death.

Then Matthew adds to it that his wife told him:

> [Matthew 27:19 NKJV]
> While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent to him, saying, "Have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him."

So he had the influence from home. And so, in wanting to do the right thing, knowing the Lord Jesus was innocent, knowing what his wife said, he suggests—he came up with a good idea. He knew that at Passover every year, they were allowed to release one prisoner from jail. And so he went down into the prison and he got the worst man there.

Barabbas, we get from further on in Luke, was the ringleader. The three—the two thieves crucified on either side of the Lord Jesus; the center cross was Barabbas' cross. There were three of them, and so he was the ringleader. He was an insurrectionist, Mark tells us; he fought against the authority of Rome. He was scrapping, and controversial, and angry, and debased, and a thief, and a murderer, no doubt maybe his whole life. It's not impossible, because we read that when he committed the thievery, that he murdered, or they had murdered in the thieving. So it's not impossible that in that large multitude of people with the chief priests and the elders, that there may have been a family member or two in that

crowd that were related to the people Barabbas murdered. I mean, there's no doubt there could have been people that hated Barabbas.

And so this is a pretty jarring story. When we put all the details that Scripture has recorded for us, we put them together, we see a graphic picture. We see that Pilate wants to do the right thing. He has all this influence. He knows He's innocent. He's had others testify that, and his wife. And so he goes into the prison, and it's a good idea: he gets the worst man there. And in his mind, he can't imagine that people would choose this over this.

They did.

The Impossibility of Neutrality

Not only did they choose Barabbas to go free—you say, "Well, they're merciful people." They're not merciful people! Their hearts were desperately wicked, because it says that they chose Jesus to be crucified.

You say, "Well, I would never do that." Well, maybe you are. Maybe you are right now. Because if you have never decided to follow Jesus, where are you? Where are you? Do we somehow think that we can be neutral? You know: "I wouldn't choose Barabbas, but I haven't chosen Jesus. I'm neutral."

Say, "Well, does that stand the test of the teachings of the Lord Jesus?" Well, it doesn't.

The Lord Jesus called these chiefs and elders that stirred up the people, because originally it was the chiefs and the elders who, because of envy, hated the Lord Jesus. But they stirred the crowds up. And so the crowds were influenced by these people. And no doubt we see that all the time. That still happens. We're influenced. You're influenced. You're influenced by your parents. You're influenced by your family, by your mother—we were reminded of that in the beginning of this meeting. We're influenced by those people around us. We're influenced by our culture. We're influenced by the people around us.

And so these chief priests and the scribes, because of their envy, they influenced, stirred the people up to make a terrible decision: to choose against Christ. And so, in keeping with that, we would say, well, we would like to do the opposite this morning. We would try to, as best we're able, to influence you to make a decision for Jesus Christ, to experience something of the power of the message of the cross.

Substitution at the Cross

Say, "Well, was there power at the cross?" Yeah! You know, I don't know what you think, but someday I expect to see Barabbas. You say, "Where do you expect to see him?" I expect to see Barabbas in heaven.

Say, "Well, we don't know that." I say, well, we don't know that, but I know this: that Barabbas was waiting in the dungeon of Pilate's holding cell, and he could no doubt hear the crowds crying out. And he's waiting to hear who they would choose. And Barabbas that day got to go free.

Do you think Barabbas went to the cross to see the Man who took his place? You know, that's what salvation is. Salvation is people coming to the realization that the death that the Lord Jesus died on the cross was the death **I** deserved. But in fact, God made the Lord Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin for me. And so the Lord Jesus took my place when He died on the cross of Calvary. And so He took Barabbas'—physically took Barabbas' place.

And so I'd be surprised if Barabbas never went to see what the Lord Jesus did for him. And I would be surprised if, when he went and saw what the Lord Jesus did for him, he didn't love the Lord Jesus for doing it. That would be the most sensible decision he ever made. And that's actually the word used in the gospel. When men choose the life that's presented in Jesus Christ, the Bible says they came to their senses. So the rest is insanity. It's insanity to end up in a lost eternity, considering what Christ has made available at a cross called Calvary.

First-Century Witnesses of the Cross

And so you say, "Well, we don't know if Barabbas was saved." You say, "Okay, fair enough." We know one of his friends was. We know that there was a thief on either side of the Lord Jesus, and one of them went to heaven. I mean, he himself would have been a violent offender, a hard man. Luke tells us about it a little further on in the same chapter, that he saw something—this thief, unnamed thief—he saw something in the Lord Jesus that drew his heart, and he asked the Lord Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom. And the Lord Jesus told him he would experience it that day. I mean, we can read it. It's in verse 40:

> [Luke 23:40-43 NKJV]
> 40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we

> receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." [42] Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." [43] And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

So Barabbas' good friend, he's in heaven. And say, "What did he do?" He received Christ as his substitution. He acknowledged the sinless perfection of the Lord Jesus; said to his friend on the other side, "This Man's done nothing wrong. We're getting the wages for our sin: death." Then he says to his friend, "Don't you have any fear of God, seeing just in a few hours you're going to be in eternity?"

And so Paul said that the message of the cross is foolishness to the one on the one side, but it's the power of God unto salvation on the other. So there's two thieves; half of them were saved. And so if Barabbas is going to be in heaven, now that's two-thirds of that group.

The Romans—they were the ones responsible for nailing the Lord Jesus to the cross. What about them? Do you think they'll be in heaven? Well, verse 47 of chapter 23 says:

> [Luke 23:47 NKJV]
> So when the centurion saw what had happened, he glorified God, saying, "Certainly this was a righteous Man!"

Is he going to be in heaven? Is he going to be in heaven? He had a change of heart. What he saw that day at Calvary changed his eternal destiny.

Say, "What about the masses that yelled out for His crucifixion, that were influenced by the chief priests and the elders?" Well, when we turn to the book of Acts that Luke also wrote for us, we see that about 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost, and then about 5,000, and then a great multitude. Say, "Where do those people come from?" Well, they came from Jerusalem, no doubt—most of them, not all of them.

Say, "What about the men responsible for it, the chief priests and the elders?" Turn to the book of Acts, chapter 6. Acts chapter 6, verse 7 says:

> [Acts 6:7 NKJV]
> Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Amen!

Paul said that the message of the cross is foolishness to them who do not believe, but to us who believe, it's the power of God and salvation. We love the message of the cross. We witnessed three this morning who praised God for the message of the cross—that the message of the cross can soften the hardest hearts. Why? Because of who the Lord Jesus is. That's what they all had in common, all these people. They physically witnessed the Lord Jesus giving Himself as an offering for sin.

And when people acknowledge that I'm the sinner Christ died for—as they, like Peter who was in the—not the Apostle Peter, that Peter was in the baptismal tank—when they acknowledge, when we acknowledge that I'm the guilty one and the Lord Jesus died for my salvation to pay the penalty for my sin, and I asked Him, or you asked Him, like Peter asked Him, to save us from our sin, He's glad to do it. That's why He came into the world: to save sinners.

We're thankful for the message, the cross of the Lord Jesus, and plenty of New Testament witness to the power it had in the lives of those who were there at the first century and witnessed it firsthand. Many of them, no doubt, will be in heaven because they came to the realization of who they were, who the Lord Jesus is, and what He did for them.

Closing Prayer

Let's close with a word of prayer.

Father, we're again grateful for Your Word. We're thankful for the message, the Lord Jesus. Father, we're thankful that the Lord Jesus loved us; He gave Himself for us. We're thankful for even the testimony of the baptisms of brothers and sister, that it needs to be personal. The Lord Jesus taught that individually we need to make a decision. And we witnessed that in the life of the Apostle Paul in his clear language as he would rejoice:

> [Galatians 2:20 NKJV]
> I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Father, we pray that it wouldn't be anybody in this room who couldn't pray that prayer, couldn't thank the Lord Jesus for loving them, for giving Himself for them. Pray You bless our fellowship downstairs. Give thanks in the precious name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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